



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Second Sunday of Lent Cycle A



"The Transfiguration" by James Tissot 1886-1894



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Prayer of St. Catherine of Siena

“My Nature is Fire”

In your nature, eternal Godhead,
I shall come to know my nature.
And what is my nature, boundless love?
It is fire,
because you are nothing but a fire of love.
And you have given humankind
a share in this nature,
for by the fire of love you created us.
And so with all other people
and every created thing;
you made them out of love.
O ungrateful people!
What nature has your God given you?
His very own nature!
Are you not ashamed to cut yourself off from such a noble thing
through the guilt of deadly sin?
O eternal Trinity, my sweet love!
You, light, give us light.
You, wisdom, give us wisdom.
You, supreme strength, strengthen us.
Today, eternal God,
let our cloud be dissipated
so that we may perfectly know and follow your Truth in truth,
with a free and simple heart.
God, come to our assistance!
Lord, make haste to help us!

Amen.

Catholic
**Faith, Life
& Creed**
Version 2.0

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Editor: Bill Huebsch

Published cooperatively by
TeamRCIA.com and
PastoralPlanning.com.

Liturgical Context

- ▶ The first two Sundays of Lent present the temptation of Jesus and his transfiguration.
- ▶ Abraham is remembered as our father in faith by Jewish, Muslim and Christian believers.
- ▶ We recall the Abraham saga on the Second Sunday of Lent every year.
- ▶ Abraham represents the typical believer. Today we hear of his call by God, a reminder that each of us is called by God.
- ▶ God not only called Abraham but he called forth the chosen people—the People of God. We are all members of that sacred body of believers.
- ▶ Our liturgy celebrates that God is present in the chosen people, the royal priesthood, and the gathered assembly of believers.
- ▶ The second Sunday of each Lenten season is set aside to recall Jesus' transfiguration.
- ▶ The celebration of the transfiguration sets the stage for our own ascent to Jerusalem--our own cycle of dying and rising.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings. (You may want to concentrate on the Gospel alone.)

First reading: Genesis 12, 1-4a

- ▶ Abraham, the protagonist in today's first reading, was the leader of a band of nomadic shepherds.
- ▶ God's great saving design began to unfurl in the person of Abraham.
- ▶ God called Abraham out from the land of his kinfolk.
- ▶ God intended that Abraham would lead a great nation and be a paragon of faith for all time and for all generations.
- ▶ The significant themes in the Abraham saga point to God's relationship not just with Abraham but with all humanity.
- ▶ God promised Abraham that he would make him the father of a great nation.
- ▶ **God kept his promise!**
- ▶ Abraham in turn was faithful to God who in turn blessed him for the role he was destined to fulfill.
- ▶ Abraham became the father of the people of Israel; their saga had a lasting imprint on all the events of the first five books of the bible called the Pentateuch.
- ▶ God appeared to Abraham. His profound experience of God's presence would have a lasting effect on the direction and course of Abraham's life.
- ▶ God promised Abraham that he would become the father of a people, the leader of a great nation.

- ▶ What God asked in return from Abraham and Sarah was complete trust.
- ▶ Abraham trusted God. His story, however, reveals a brief transgression in which he refused to believe that Sarah could provide a progeny and instead took a slave girl to father his child.
- ▶ In spite of this transgression Abraham practiced a *habit of faithfulness* that would be his constant companion and sustain him when called upon to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac.
- ▶ Today's story reveals God's action and his faithfulness. God expects a response in return for his presence and his saving works in our lives.
- ▶ The human response to God's action is faithful, trust-filled love, submission to God's will, and hope in his saving mercy.
- ▶ The Abraham saga takes place in the shadow of the great flood. God destroyed the world as a result of the world's sin.
- ▶ Abraham signals a new day—a shift—a reversal in God's plan of salvation. God anointed Abraham the father of a newly formed people. God blessed Abraham and by extension all people were and are similarly blessed.
- ▶ Abraham is an example of what it means to be a faith-filled believer. His blessing extends to us and out to the world.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What is the lesson in this reading? How could this possibly be a word for us today?
- ▶ What does it mean to you to “have faith”?
- ▶ Describe the way in which you or someone you know has responded to God's faithfulness by your faith-filled love, your submission to God's will and your hope in his saving mercy?
- ▶ If someone were to call you a believer, what does that imply to you? What are the implications and responsibilities attached to that description?

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 1 8b-10

- ▶ Paul's second letter to his good friend and associate Timothy comes from the pen of the suffering, condemned servant of God who is awaiting execution yet still preaches the Gospel from his cell.
- ▶ Paul exhorts Timothy to hold fast in the face of persecution, to avoid false teaching and to preach the Good news regardless of the consequences. He uses himself as an example.
- ▶ Paul's letter is a reminder to all believers that servants of God can expect to suffer.

Participation in the Paschal Mystery—in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection- is a requisite to an authentic Gospel living.

- ▶ Believers need only look to Paul—a bastion of strength and endurance in the face of persecution, suffering and pending death.
- ▶ Paul’s primary message was participation in the life of the crucified Christ.
- ▶ He preached the Good News of Christ who conquered sin and death once and for all.
- ▶ Paul insists that Christ gifts us with the necessary grace and strength to endure suffering, persecution for the sake of the Gospel, and hardship.
- ▶ We need only look to him who went before us.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading? What should we be shouting from the rooftops?
- ▶ Why do you suppose Paul insists that there is redemptive value in our suffering? What are the implications for us today?
- ▶ How could there ever be Good News in suffering?
- ▶ How can we know for sure if we are hearing “false teaching” or the authentic gospel of Christ?

Gospel: Matthew 17: 1-9

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ The story of Jesus’ transfiguration appears in all three synoptic Gospels.
- ▶ Scholars tell us that the recording of this event by all three synoptic evangelists is a sure sign that Christians regarded it as unequivocally authentic.
- ▶ When one reflects on what Jesus’ disciples must have experienced one is in absolute amazement and awe!
- ▶ All three evangelists relate the story:

- Mark's telling of the event was intended to bolster the understanding of the disciples since Jesus' identity was constantly being questioned. Mark's rendering of events was a call to faith-filled obedience. Moses and Elijah look ahead to Jesus' own passage from death to life. Jesus will lead the people out of bondage just as the people had been led by Moses generations earlier.
- Luke's version proclaims Jesus a great prophet—a suffering servant and Messiah who would be vindicated by God. Believers who wish to follow him will experience the same journey—suffering, death and resurrection.
- Matthew's intent is to illustrate to his primarily Jewish/Christian audience that Jesus is superior to Moses and is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets—hence the appearance of Elijah and Moses. Matthew challenges the disciples to hear the word of Christ and to act upon it. Matthew refers to the event as a *vision*—a reference to a God-given revelation to the disciples in which they were able to experience something out of the realm of ordinary human experience. Extraordinary phenomenon was common in ancient culture. Post-enlightenment culture has lost the ability to believe in such altered states of consciousness.
- ▶ Palestine was a typical shame and honor based culture of the ancient Mediterranean world. When one reads the transfiguration from the perspective of the culture of the time it is easy to see that the transfiguration functions like a parable. Jesus' experienced a complete and total reversal.
- ▶ In some circles Jesus was a disgrace. First, he was creating a stir wherever he went. Furthermore, he was an unmarried man, another reason to be looked upon with disdain. Men of his age were expected to marry.
- ▶ The transfiguration signaled a reversal of fortunes as in all parables.
- ▶ Jesus was blessed by his Father; he was honored. God enters into intimate, loving dialogue with Jesus, thus vindicating him.
- ▶ The shamed Jesus was now honored and vindicated by God.
- ▶ The cross for some was seen as a sign that God had abandoned Jesus to the extreme. How could he have truly been the Messiah?
- ▶ Jesus trusted his Father's saving plan. He refused to believe that God had abandoned him.
- ▶ Jesus showed us the way. Believers are to be faithful to God no matter the consequences. We are to trust that God will never abandon us.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group.

- ▶ Have you ever felt that God abandoned you in a time of suffering?
 - ▶ How do you think God would respond to that question?
 - ▶ Looking back do you still feel you were abandoned?
 - ▶ What does this story have to say about God's abandonment in times of suffering?
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- ▶ Jesus, the new Moses, the Lord, the new Law Giver is now our Lord and Savior.
 - ▶ Mount Tabor in Galilee is believed to be the mount of the transfiguration. The mountain symbolizes the gateway between the heavenly plane and the earthly sphere—between the spiritual and the material world.
 - ▶ “As one who stood atop that mountain on the Feast of the Transfiguration, I can readily understand the allegory. The visitor stands transfixed as the panoramic lushness of the valley glistens like the jewels that adorn the new and eternal city, the heavenly Jerusalem. I felt as if I could “reach out and touch” the heavenly realm at a mere arm’s length! Awesome is the only apt adjective!” (Birmingham, Mary. *Word and Worship Workbook, Year A, Second Sunday of Lent*, Paulist Press.)
 - ▶ As the Church grew and developed in its understanding of the transfiguration, a theology was borne. The transfiguration came to be understood as the revelation of Christ's divine status.
 - ▶ The early Church understood it in different terms. Mathew's community believed the event was an announcement of Jesus as Messiah.
 - ▶ The transfiguration is a sneak preview. It provides us with a glimpse of the glory into which Christ will enter after his resurrection from the dead. Christ will rule heaven and earth from his restored throne. He will return to his Father's right hand and from the holy mountain he will rule the earth. The transfiguration is a preview of things to come.
 - ▶ Just the mere presence of Moses and Elijah interpret the event. Moses told the people that a future prophet would be the voice of God and reveal God and his saving plan to all creation. Elijah calls to mind the last days—the Parousia. Moses and Elijah function like a clarion call announcing the advent of the final age.
 - ▶ Peter provides for us—feeble human beings that we are-- reason to believe that there is hope for us. His raison d'être of “act first, think later” is interrupted by a *Voice from Heaven*. All the disciples were gripped with fear—a sign of Jesus' superior teaching authority. Jesus approached them, touched them with his healing, compassionate love, and invited them to rise.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group.

- ▶ Why can we look to Peter and be comforted? What is it about Peter that gives us hope for our own redemption?
- ▶ One cannot miss the irony and the paradox. On this mount Jesus is encircled by saints. On the mount of Calvary, he will be enclosed by criminals. On this mountain Jesus' clothes glimmer brilliantly and he is honored. On the hill of Calvary they are torn in shreds from his body and he is shamed. His Father's voice from heaven claims him as Son; his murderers insultingly do the same at his execution.
- ▶ One cannot approach the brilliant glory of the transfiguration without considering the bloody horror of the cross yet to come. The cross of victory and the cross of suffering both point to the ultimate paradox of the Christian life.
- ▶ There is no resurrection without the cross—not for Christ, not for us. His suffering and his ascended glory were intimately bound together in one definitive plan of salvation.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life.

- ▶ What spoke to you the most in today's Gospel?
- ▶ What is the challenge of this Gospel in your life today?
- ▶ The cross of victory and the cross of suffering both point to the ultimate paradox of the Christian life. In what way have you, or anyone you know, experienced the cross of victory and the cross of suffering in your life?
- ▶ What is the Good News in this Gospel when it comes to the suffering in your life?
- ▶ What does today's reading teach us about the role of Jesus in God's saving plan?
- ▶ Why is the story of the transfiguration a good Lenten reflection?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat opening prayer OR Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97

Appendix

The story of the transfiguration reminds me that the suffering of this earthly sojourn is transitory. When I struggle with the powerlessness and the futility of any situation in my life I can look to the transfiguration and be comforted that Christ:

1. knows my suffering,
2. walked through it before I did,
3. reminds me that good always comes out of the bad for those who believe,
4. reminds me that no matter what I am called upon to endure, I know the joy of the resurrection and my faith will sustain me.

Many years ago my husband came home and told me he was being transferred. I was devastated. It was November. I was sure I would never find another job in a parish; such positions would have long ago been filled. I was angry and did not want to embrace the unknown that lie ahead. I simply wanted to say “no”.

Later that day I had a “come to Jesus meeting” and finally turned my life over to God’s will rather than my own. “Your will, Lord, not mine,” was my parting prayer. I am willing to let go of this work if it is your will.

The next day I arrived at my office, a national bulletin was sitting on my desk. A position in a parish was announced in that bulletin. I asked for an interview. Three weeks later my husband, my four kids, a dog and a cat were on the way to our new life in a state far, far away from the roots we had planted since childhood.

The transfiguration was a reminder to me that no matter what lie ahead I could count on God’s guiding Voice and the glory that awaited us no matter the outcome.

As it turned out, the move was the best thing that ever could have happened to us—a resurrection of epic proportions. Doors were opened for me in my work and professional life that perhaps never could have been opened had I stayed where I was.

The cross of the unknown was difficult to bear; the cross of letting go was even worse. But God in his wisdom led us through the dark night into the brilliance of Mount Tabor and our lives were forever changed.

The transfiguration is a feast that invites ongoing faith and trust—a kenosis in which we trust that God will sustain us with his glory no matter the cross that lies ahead.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Faith
Overview of Lent
Cross and Paschal Mystery
Jesus Christ

Incarnation
Sin and Grace
Sacrament of Reconciliation

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

FAITH

Today's first reading tells the story of Abraham our father in FAITH. There are two primary themes in this story—first, God made a promise to Abraham and second, it would be fulfilled in his lifetime and would impact the salvation history of the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. Abraham was the epitome of faithfulness. He believed God's word to him. He is an icon for us today of what it means to have faith in God. God's promise to Abraham required steadfast faith on the part of Abraham. In the second reading today Paul insisted on steadfast faith in the face of persecution. It is thus that we focus our attention on what it means to be converted to Christ—to have faith. Our doctrinal session will focus our attention on what the Church teaches about FAITH.

OVERVIEW OF LENT

During these first Sundays of Lent it is most appropriate to spend extended time reflecting upon the season and what it celebrates. Thus today's doctrinal session will focus on an OVERVIEW OF THE SEASON OF LENT.

CROSS and PASCHAL MYSTERY

Paul tells his community to have faith in the face of persecution and suffering. Every Christian is to embrace the cross of Christ. Jesus shows his disciples what awaits them for their sacrifice to embrace his Paschal Mystery. Jesus foreshadows his own death and glorification in today's Gospel. Thus, it is fitting that we focus our attention on the CROSS AND PASCHAL MYSTERY.

JESUS CHRIST

Today's story of the transfiguration of Christ looks forward to the Easter event and what we believe about the salvation Christ won for us through his death and resurrection. Today is an appropriate time to focus our attention on Jesus Christ.

INCARNATION

While Incarnation seems like a strange doctrinal issue for Lent, it is most appropriate as it addresses the culmination of God's saving plan of sending his Son to redeem the world. The Gospel's story of the Transfiguration recalls and exalts that saving event. It is thus fitting that today's doctrinal focus is the INCARNATION of God's Son Jesus Christ.

SIN AND GRACE

The season of Lent is time to not only to focus our attention on preparing for baptism and the renewal of baptism; it is also a time to focus our attention on the sin in our lives and God's incredible reconciling mercy in the face of such sin. Thus, today it is appropriate that we focus our doctrinal session on SIN AND GRACE.

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

The liturgies of Lent are an invitation to deep, interior conversion. The Church continues Jesus' saving reconciling mission through the sacraments. The remedy for humanity's sin today can be found in the sacrament of Eucharist which re-presents God's saving mission on the cross, and the sacrament of reconciliation. The sacrament of reconciliation is a celebration of God's incredible mercy extended to sinners. It is thus fitting that today our doctrinal session will focus on the sacrament of RECONCILIATION.